



Middle East Security Report

Mapping conflict, violence and extremism in the Middle East

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Trends in instability and armed conflict in the Middle East.

When looking back five years later, the impact of the Arab spring was largely to weaken authoritarian control in the affected countries. However, the momentum was insufficient to facilitate a legitimate and effective replacement of government. The uprising's most spectacular and destabilising episode was the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, which spread Tuareg mercenaries, weapons and supplies across the sahel, leading to the establishment of the short-lived Islamic republic of Azawad in northern Mali. It opened up a jihadist space in the sahel between Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.

In Syria, president Bashar al-Assad has been able to withstand the impact of the Arab spring, but has lost control over large parts of his country since then. The withdrawal of US/UK forces from neighbouring Iraq facilitated the rise of the Islamic state to its current pre-eminence over al-Qaeda.

Eventually the blowback of the War on Terror (the invasion of Iraq in particular), the regional impact of the collapse of central state control in Libya and the domestic counter-terrorism measures adopted by the current government in Egypt and elsewhere may have set political and economic liberalisation in north Africa back several years. Perceptions of risk are highly correlated with levels of news coverage, but may be quite different from actual risk.

The current impression, considering the extent of news coverage, is that terrorism is a large contributor to instability and to fatalities in the Middle East particularly in those countries with high levels of conflict.

Extremist violence accelerated sharply in 2011 and 2012 after the US-led invasion of Iraq. Agency data also indicates that fatalities from terrorism in the Middle East increased steeply in 2014 to present day and has continued to grow. One third of fatalities from terrorism recorded by intelligence agencies over the last few years occurred in the Middle East.

This is largely the result of the extraordinary high levels of violence perpetrated by ISIS (Iraq & Syria) and Al-Qaeda (Yemen & Africa).

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Middle East has played a more prominent role in US and its allies' policies than ever before. The West relies on Middle Eastern partners such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, UAE and others to fight terrorism from within and to form a strong anti-insurgent foundation in the region.

What are the prospects for political security and stability in the Middle East in the foreseeable future?

The security environment in the Middle East has become increasingly complicated during the past decade. Up to and including the 1991 Gulf War, the regional environment was largely shaped by fears of interstate aggression, either by superpower intervention or by regional states against each other. Fears of interstate aggression certainly remain today, but they are manifesting themselves in new ways. The Arab-Israeli conflict has been a persistent source of tension for decades and terrorists recruited and trained in the Middle East are now carrying out attacks far beyond their own borders, creating strong global interests in countering the sources of this phenomenon.

Many of these security issues are profoundly affected by the many domestic changes occurring in the Middle East. Oil revenues are much lower than in the last twenty years causing economic problems that range from reduced budgets to rapidly escalating debt. Structural economic problems remain profound, while demands on the state are increasing throughout the region as a result of rising expectations and population growth. New information technologies are providing insurgences with a wider range of viewpoints than they have ever had before, while in a few states, attempts at political reform are increasing their ability to express their views and influence the decision making process.

For most of the 1990s, Middle East politics, and particularly decisions on security, remained the preserve of elites.

Although no regime's decision making was completely immune from public opinion, in general the public had little input into foreign policy decision making and leaders could mostly cloak their actions. Increases in popular input into decision making and the explosion of new and freer media are expanding the range of viewpoints that are considered while policy is being formulated.

True democracy remains far away, but the scope and scale of debate have increased and regimes are less free to pursue unpopular policies without constraint. Moreover, the composition of the elite itself is changing because of the deaths of aged leaders. Since 1997, new leaders have taken power in Iran, Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, and Bahrain, raising the hope that these countries' policies will change as well.

In the 1990s, Iran, Iraq, and other sponsors of terrorism conducted limited strikes without suffering massive retaliation. Such tolerance, however, has now eroded. The toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan vividly illustrated the U.S. and its allies' willingness and capacity to overthrow regimes that support terrorist groups. That point was further emphasized in the spring of 2003, when the Bush administration used Saddam Hussein's possible connections with al Qaeda as one of the justifications for war.

Evan though Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan were defeated the US and Allies unfortunately opened the way allowing the Islamic group ISIS to take a strong hold on regions in Iraq and Syria through extraordinary brutality and widespread kidnapping and Al-Qaeda created a vast footprint in Yemen.

Although all regimes in the Middle East were well aware of the threat that Islamic radicals posed (several regimes had long been fighting Islamic insurgencies and many others monitored and arrested radicals), the attention of the US and its Allies' was not focused on regional domestic politics. However the domestic policies of regimes, particularly their willingness to allow citizens to support or join radical causes abroad, directly affect Middle East and global security.

Though well financed and equipped the two of the most influential, brutal terror groups operating and count for 90 % of terror attacks, fatalities, corruption, criminality and kidnappings are the ISIS group and Al-Qaeda.

So let's take an overview at each group individually to asses there regional footprints and threat to the stability and security within the Middle East.

Recently ISIS has changed its name to simply the Islamic State, after the Islamic group extended the civil war from Syria and Iraq. It insists a caliphate has been established across both countries and has released a map outlining its territorial ambitions, stretching from the Atlantic coast of Spain and Morocco to the western border of Myanmar.

ISIS's priority is to sustain and consolidate its present campaign in Syria and Iraq and its affiliation with Al-Qaeda in bordering countries than dissipate resources and personnel in non-core and new regions for the movement such as Southeast Asia. "However, ISIS's success to date has and no doubt will continue to attract recruits to the movement with any survivors to what may be years of fighting from countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand representing a new threat based on their skills and experience.

The group seized Mosul, Iraq and already rules an area larger than the United Kingdom. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been its leader since May 2010, but until last summer, his most recent known appearance on film was a grainy mug shot from a stay in U.S. captivity at Camp Bucca during the occupation of Iraq. Then without pre-warning he stepped into the pulpit of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Mosul, to deliver a Ramadan sermon as the first caliph in generations—upgrading his resolution from grainy to high-definition, and his position from hunted guerrilla to commander of all Muslims. The inflow of jihadists that followed, from around the world, was unprecedented in its pace and volume, and is continuing.

Our ignorance of the Islamic State is in some ways understandable: It is a hermit kingdom; few have gone there and returned. Baghdadi has spoken on camera only once. But his address, and the Islamic State's countless other propaganda videos and encyclicals, are online, and the caliphate's supporters have toiled mightily to make their project knowable. We can gather that their state rejects peace as a matter of principle; that it hungers for genocide; that its religious views make it constitutionally incapable of certain types of change, even if that change might ensure its survival; and that it considers itself a harbinger of—and headline player in—the imminent end of the world.

The Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), follows a distinctive variety of Islam whose beliefs about the path to the Day of Judgment matter to its strategy, and can help the West know its enemy and predict its behaviour. We have misunderstood the nature of the Islamic State in at least two ways. First, we tend to see jihadism as monolithic, and to apply the logic of al-Qaeda to an organization that has decisively eclipsed it. The Islamic State supporters still refer to Osama bin Laden as “Sheikh Osama,” a title of honour. But jihadism has evolved since al-Qaeda's heyday, from about 1998 to 2003, and many jihadists disdain the group's priorities and current leadership.

Bin Laden (when alive) viewed his terrorism as a prologue to a caliphate he did not expect to see in his lifetime. His organization was flexible, operating as a geographically diffuse network of autonomous cells.

The Islamic State, by contrast, requires territory to remain legitimate, and a top-down structure to rule it. (Its bureaucracy is divided into civil and military arms, and its territory into provinces.)

The ideological purity of the Islamic State has one compensating virtue: it allows us to predict some of the group's actions. Osama bin Laden was seldom predictable. He ended his first television interview cryptically. CNN's Peter Arnett asked him, "What are your future plans?" Bin Laden replied, "You'll see them and hear about them in the media, God willing." By contrast, the Islamic State boasts openly about its plans—not all of them, but enough so that by listening carefully, we can deduce how it intends to govern and expand.

Given everything we know about the Islamic State, continuing to slowly bleed it, through air strikes and proxy warfare appears the best of bad military options. Neither the Kurds nor the Shia will ever subdue and control the whole Sunni heartland of Syria and Iraq—they are hated there, and have no appetite for such an adventure anyway. But they can keep the Islamic State from fulfilling its duty to expand. And with every month that it fails to expand, it resembles less the conquering state of the Prophet Muhammad than yet another Middle Eastern government failing to bring prosperity to its people.

The humanitarian cost of the Islamic State's existence is high. But its threat to the United States and its allies' is smaller than it's all too frequent conflation with al-Qaeda would suggest. Al-Qaeda's core is rare among jihadist groups for its focus on the "far enemy" (the West); most jihadist groups' main concerns lie closer to home.

That's especially true of the Islamic State, precisely because of its ideology. It sees enemies everywhere around it, and while its leadership wishes ill on the west the application of Sharia in the caliphate and the expansion to contiguous lands is paramount.

UNLIKE OTHER TERRORIST GROUPS, AL-QAEDA presents an unprecedented threat to America, its allies, and to global security in general. In addition to training its own members—(8000 was the October 2003 estimate, according to the Western intelligence community)—al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime trained 70,000 members in its camps in Afghanistan. While al-Qaeda conducted one major attack every year prior to 9/11, al-Qaeda and its associated groups have conducted one attack every three months since 9/11. Although it is the most hunted terrorist group in history, the campaign of holy war unleashed by al-Qaeda is likely to outlive itself and the current generation of Islamists.

This is because al-Qaeda's real strength lies not in its global infrastructure and membership per se but in its overarching and highly appealing ideology. In keeping with its original mandate, al-Qaeda's principal aim today is to inspire and incite Islamist movements and the Muslim masses worldwide to attack those perceived to be the enemies of Islam. Although the majority of Muslims worldwide do not support al-Qaeda, the group is constantly seeking to reinvigorate the global jihad movement by exploiting the widespread suffering, resentment, and anger in the Muslim world and turning it against the United States and its allies. Considering the sympathy and new recruits it has gathered from Islamist groups in Asia, Africa, Middle East, and elsewhere, the ideological campaign unleashed by al-Qaeda has been a partial success.

Al-Qaeda recruits members through a progressive screening process. It is believed to have recruiters that travel to or are embedded in radical mosques, where they identify and befriend promising candidates.

Often the candidates are selected to travel to foreign countries such as Pakistan or Yemen for religious education. Once there, they are isolated from former friends and family and offered more rigorous training for jihad. Al-Qaeda also recruits promising prospects from radical Islamic insurgent groups that it supports around the world. Iraq recently has become an epicentre for attracting, organizing, and training a new generation of battle-hardened revolutionary terrorists.

Al-Qaeda remains a potent threat to the United States, its allies, and a wide variety of other states. But al-Qaeda's leaders increasingly must focus on their own personal security and have less time for plotting mass murder. It was more difficult for bin Laden and his lieutenants to recruit new members, train them, communicate with them, or carry out new operations. The isolation of al-Qaeda's top leaders, believed to be hidden along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and more recently Yemen, has reduced their ability to supervise the network's activities in other regions. They often must resort to unsecure low-tech communications such as letters carried by couriers.

Al-Qaeda is an amorphous network whose centre of gravity, which must be destroyed if it is to be defeated, is its leadership structure in the short run and its ideology in the long run.

Capturing or killing AQC leaders is more of an intelligence problem than a purely military one. Neutralizing the top leaders would not end the threat posed by al-Qaeda's network of quasi-independent cells, but over time it would diminish the scale of the threat, hinder their ability to coordinate operations, restrict their financing, and set back the recruitment, training, and deployment of new terrorist operatives.

Redefining the enemy as Islamic radicalism an ideology masking itself as a religion, instead of terrorism, has several important advantages. It puts the focus on battling a radical totalitarian ideology, not just its terrorist manifestations. It would also underscore the fact that this is a war of ideas, not just a war on the battlefield. And it puts a premium on the key role to be played by moderate Muslims, who also have a vital stake in the outcome of this struggle.

To win this conflict, ultimately we must convince Muslims, through reasoning or through the use of force, that totalitarian Islamic ideas have bad consequences. By fighting AQC, not just as a terrorist group, but as a radical Islamic ideologue, the United States and its allies can help Muslims see his terrorist campaign for what it is: a ruthless effort to impose a totalitarian dictatorship masked in religious symbols..

So let's review the birth of religious and political terrorism and why there are more terrorist groups within the Middle East than globally.

Worldwide, Iraq was the worst-affected country, accounting for 34 percent of terrorism-related fatalities in 2013/14, with Afghanistan ranked next with 17.3 percent. Meanwhile, between 2000 and 2013, the report found, around 5 percent of terrorism-related fatalities occurred in the 34 wealthy countries of the OECD.

The answer, in my opinion, lies in a few factors. The first is the strength of the tribal society that exists in the Middle East, which makes the formation and credibility of states where grievances can be formally heard and resolved extremely difficult. The second factor is, even where states have been created, they have been autocratic, dictatorial, and have further frustrated and made hopeless the various ethnic/religious groups demands.

So when there are no political or social structures existing to provide for some kind of resolution to problems, groups will begin to look outside the normal channels for resolution, if they feel strong enough about their demands.

So when these groups can't find a political solution, and the state it interacts with is either repressive, non-responsive, or weak, the concept of terrorism grows when it is determined that it could be the only effective method in reaching a group's political/religious goals. It began, and thrived, by developing on the heels of the colonial era, failed post-colonial attempts at state formation, and the creation of Israel. There were no state infrastructures in place to contain it and, there was a common enemy, Israel, which terrorist groups could use to gain adherents.

As these movements grew, they started to get the attention of the Middle East regimes. And when the regimes got involved, in particular Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq, that meant countries dependent on their large oil reserves, such as the U.S., got involved. And it being the Cold War and all, when the U.S. got involved, that meant the USSR got involved. Think of the power these burgeoning movements now had! It certainly spilled gas on the fire to know that all you had to do was to blow up a bus and you got the attention of the entire world (pun intended)! From a purely strategic point of view, it was, and remains, quite an effective way to be heard.

So, to summarize, terrorism is more prevalent in the Middle East because one's identity is most closely formed by their association within an ethnic tribe- a tribe that has a very long and conflicting history of warring with other ethnic tribes. This identity is very strongly felt and, because each tribe feels its own ideology is superior, or distinct, to all the rest, and they feel threatened by other tribes, it wants its values and demands to spread across the Middle East. There are also the weak or repressive states which control the oil, which brings in the interests of the big boys- the U.S., Europe, USSR/Russia, China et al, which now means a small voice, or action, can be heard in almost all of the living rooms of the world by CNN. And last but certainly not least, the continued willingness of states such as Syria, Libya, Iran, Yemen, to provide support to groups which encourages them to continue to use terrorist tactics.

Conclusion:

The Islamic State will lose a lot of its power but will find refuge and allies in the far reaches of Libya. At the same time, al Qaeda-linked militias will continue to quietly expand their influence. The Islamic State will lose power elsewhere too. Military campaigns in Iraq and Syria will degrade the group as a conventional military force but will do little to degrade it as terrorist or insurgent force. Dispersed throughout the areas they once controlled, remnants of the Islamic State will remain relevant by exploiting ethnic and sectarian divisions throughout Iraq and Syria and Europe. Terrorist attacks will therefore return to Iraq in spectacular form. (Despite the military setbacks in Iraq, the Islamic State will have a little more latitude to operate in Syria, where the coalition effort to fight Islamic State is far more convoluted.)

Islamic State attacks abroad, however, will be a much more limited threat. Militants returning home from Iraq and Syria are certainly a risk for Western countries, but they are a risk that will be mitigated by heightened awareness and intelligence oversight and increased risk of interdiction. More resourceful grassroots terrorists that do not have to rely on extensive networks and capabilities will be the bigger threat from Islamic State in 2017, especially for the West.

While the Islamic State has commanded the attention of the international community, al Qaeda has been quietly rebuilding itself, honing its capabilities in multiple theatres to stage its comeback.

Al Qaeda nodes that have restyled themselves under various names in Libya, Algeria, Mali, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen are likely to become more active and influential. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is particularly concerning. The tacit agreement it had with Saudi Arabia in Yemen has broken down, making the kingdom a viable target for the jihadist group.

Jihadists will remain active elsewhere, too, though their attacks will be relatively unsophisticated. If attacks become more complex in places like Indonesia and Bangladesh, it means more experienced fighters in the Middle East successfully found their way back home.

This report shows a systematic growth in continued terrorist attacks to force instability within the Middle East. This situation will become much worse before stability & peace as the US and its allies' look to hold back from intervention in Middle East conflicts. This will leave poorly governed states with inefficient military strength and backing to halt or eradicate terrorist and increased criminality within the Middle East. The only answer for the near future of security and stability is for the west and the countries within the Middle East who are not already working together fighting terrorism to join the fight putting aside their religious and political arguments under one mandate, to fully eradicate The Islamic State and Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups.

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